

# SELF-MADE MONSTERS

REBECCA CUTHBERT

Feminist Horrors

Introduction by Laurel Hightower

# SELF-MADE MONSTERS

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Rebecca Cuthbert



# UNDERTAKER BOOKS

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# Contents

Praise for SELF-MADE MONSTERS

Additional Titles by Rebecca Cuthbert

. Chapter

SELF-MADE MONSTERS

Here there be monsters.

Section I

1. No rest nor relief for you with me dead

2. Dare You

3. Gift

4. Cut Down

5. The Vultures Remain

6. Wanted

7. With Her

8. Falling to Pieces

9. The Reservoir

Section II

10. Lake Erie Omen

11. In Crowd

12. Reckoning

13. Makeover

14. Estuary

15. I Won't Call It a Monster

16. Beisht Kione, Come Home

17. I Take

18. The Cliffs at Battery Pointe

19. Mistress Meg O'Malley

About the Author

Acknowledgments

# Praise for SELF-MADE MONSTERS



*“ Self-Made Monsters features women and our world as we are and as we want to be. As victims, victors, and villains. As wanting, wonton, and wallowing, but without judgement or disdain. Rebecca Cuthbert delivers sharp blows in the form of short fiction and poetry that leave the reader both satisfied and craving more.”*

*-Angela Sylvaine, author, Frost Bite, The Dead Spot*

*“Self-Made Monsters by Rebecca Cuthbert is full of short, heartbreaking stories, and her prose is elegant and evocative, seamlessly blending lyrical beauty with raw, unfiltered emotion. Each story is crafted to both challenge and resonate, giving vibrant voice to the diverse experiences of women. Cuthbert’s use of language and detail is precise, and she gives us stories ranging from the horrifically, skillfully suggestive to the incredibly grotesque and graphic, stories of sadness and loss, loneliness and vengeance. In these pages you’ll find stories of women falling apart,*

*sometimes literally, but always taking control, making it work, making it theirs.”*

**-Jolie Toomajan**, Shirley Jackson Award® winning editor, Aseptic and Faintly Sadistic

*“Self-Made Monsters is an exquisitely beautiful set of vignettes that somehow merge horror and slice of life into stories that feel intimate and real...and all the more horrific. And when you read each story a second time...it just gets scarier. This is the perfect book to read by the fire, cozy with your blanket and tea, to make you contemplate how life could be very different for us all.”*

**-Tonia Ransom**, World Fantasy Award® winning creator and executive producer, Nightlight, a creepy fiction podcast featuring tales by Black writers, and Afflicted, a horror thriller audio drama; author, Risen

*“Rebecca Cuthbert’s Self-Made Monsters is a staggering work that stabs deep in the heart, alternately drawing you in with a quiet voice and then exploding in your brain. The depth of feeling for a woman’s perceived place in the world—and her defiance of it—resounds through the entire collection, but nowhere stronger than in the story, ‘Falling to Pieces.’ This is an author to watch and seek out.”*

**-Carol Gyzander**, Bram Stoker Award® nominee; editor, Discontinue if Death Ensues

*“In stunning, vivid prose, Cuthbert’s feminist horror sings of the terror of the everyday; Self-Made Monsters celebrates women’s rights, but glories in*

women's wrongs. Shudderingly real and recognizable and savagely beautiful."

**-Elizabeth Broadbent**, author, Ink Vine

"Cuthbert's collection is a testament to the strength of her voice, as well as her range. The format of the fiction within this book shifts from shorter to longer form, delving even into poetry, while the quality remains unwavering. Self-Made Monsters is a title that should not be missed by any horror fan."

**-Cat Voleur**, author, Revenge Arc

"‘A smashed marionette,’ ‘a queen of scale and bone,’ a ‘body sculptor’ and her assistant; Self-Made Monsters by Rebecca Cuthbert is a veritable encyclopedia of different ways women can be monsters, victims, heroes, and bystanders. This collection contains multitudes but never loses sight of its clear through-lines. Stories tend to be short and sit alongside several deliciously dark poems, meaning Cuthbert doesn't waste time getting to the meat of what horror fans crave. Sometimes this comes in the form of violence, other times the pareidolia found in wild places or the temptation of the front door of that spooky house down the street. It's easy to tell yourself ‘just one more,’ over and over until you realize you've devoured the whole book in one sitting."

**-Amelia Gorman**, author, Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota: Poems

"Whether presenting short stories, drabbles, poems, or other forms, Cuthbert writes memorable characters, mostly female, who are living



*familiar lives that go astray in consistently inventive and haunting ways. These are stories that you will want to reflect upon. But fair warning, her characters might just accompany you to the supermarket, offering you a darker lens through which to view the world. She is that talented. This gem of a collection is highly recommended.”*

**-Christopher Ryan**, award-winning hybrid author publisher, four novels, Soul Scream Anthology series, Rebecca Cuthbert’s Creep This Way

*“Wow, I absolutely tore through this collection in a couple hours! Compulsively readable, the poetry is extremely tight and the stories are delightfully eerie and downright fun.”*

**-Christopher O’Halloran**, author, Pushing Daisy

# Additional Titles by Rebecca Cuthbert



*In Memory of Exoskeletons*, Alien Buddha Press, 2023, poetry

*CREEP THIS WAY: How to Become a Horror Writer with 24 Tips to Get You Ghouling*, Seamus and Nunzio Productions, 2024, nonfiction

*Down in the Dark Deep Where the Puddlers Dwell*, AEA Press, 2024, children's book

*Six O'Clock House & Other Strange Tales*, Watertown Hill Publishing, 2025, stories

*The Hauntings Back Home*, 2025, Undertaker Books, stories

*High Up on Witch Mountain*, AEA Press, 2025, children's book

*Forgive Us Our Trespasses*, 2026, Undertaker Books, novella

## **Titles by Laurel Hightower**

*Whispers in the Dark*, JournalStone Publishing, 2018, novel

*Crossroads*, Off Limits Press, 2020, novella

*Below*, Ghoulish Books, 2022, novella

*Every Woman Knows This*, Death Knell Press, 2023, stories

*Silent Key*, Flame Tree Press, 2023, novel

*The Day of the Door*, Ghoulish Books, 2024, novel

### **First Publication Credits**

*The following works have been published in these journals and anthologies in their current or earlier forms, for which I am grateful:*

“No Rest Nor Relief For You With Me Dead,” *Shakespeare Unleashed*, Monstrous Books and Crystal Lake Publishing

“Dare You,” *In the Bleak Midwinter: Gothic Advent Calendar*, *Diet Milk Magazine*

“Gift,” *Zine #50*, Alien Buddha Press

“Wanted,” *Psythur*, Raven’s Quoth Press

“Falling to Pieces,” *Defunkt Magazine’s “Anatomy”* issue; *We’re Here: Best Queer Speculative Fiction 2022*, Neon Hemlock Press

“The Cliffs at Battery Pointe,” *Creepy Podcast*

“Lake Erie Omen,” *Siren’s Call E-zine*, Siren’s Call Publications

“In Crowd,” *THE START*, Rebellion Lit

“Reckoning,” *Zine #50*, Alien Buddha Press

“Reservoir,” *Deadly Drabble Tuesdays*, Hungry Shadow Press

“Makeover,” *Blood & Jazz Podcast* by Last Girls Club

“I Take,” *NOM NOM: Halloween Dark Drabbles*, Black Hare Press

“The Vultures Remain,” *Creepy Podcast*

“Estuary,” *Seaside Gothic*

*This collection is dedicated  
to every woman who's been told  
to shut the hell up  
but keeps on talking.  
Keep talking.*

# SELF-MADE MONSTERS



**By**  
**Rebecca Cuthbert**

# Here there be monsters.



An Introduction by Laurel Hightower

A throwaway line, scrawled by uninterested and ignorant hands, an admonition against exploring past the bounds of the known world. No need to look further, to make a distinction or peer into those murky depths to see what truly lurks beneath—it is enough to label the unknown “other,” lock it away and turn from the knowledge. Good enough for some, but in *SELF-MADE MONSTERS*, Rebecca Cuthbert invites us to plunge with her off the edge of the safe world into a collective experience of dread. Having had the pleasure of joining Rebecca recently on a podcast to discuss the social commentary of *Rosemary’s Baby*, especially in context of a post-Roe world, I jumped at the chance to write this introduction. I knew Rebecca to be intelligent and measured, with a knack for research and presentation, and a vein of molten feminist fury that matched my own. *SELF-MADE MONSTERS* fulfills all the promises hinted by such an accomplished writer, and I flew through it.

I’ll admit that it’s only been in the last couple of years that I’ve found my stride as a reader of short stories. My literal mind craved definition, a solid

ending on terms I could assimilate with what I knew of the world. Short stories, especially those in the horror genre, often refuse to give that closure. The most effective use of horror is in the unknown, and I've slowly learned to lean into that, even if there are times I'm tempted to message an author and ask if a character *really* bit the dust or if the ambiguity leaves room for survival. (It's rarely the latter.) I found SELF-MADE MONSTERS to be the perfect collection with which to learn to let go and follow the shadowed path, my way only lit one or two steps beyond. No point in trying to plan ahead—Cuthbert's stories run at a relentless pace, and you'd better learn to keep up lest you get left behind in the uneasy night.

With the voice and heart of a poet, Cuthbert pulls the reader in with deft brushstrokes of prose. Nothing is wasted—her stories are crafted with an economy of words, the swift creation of ambiance and atmosphere, such as in “With Her,” a chilling tale that perfectly captures the feeling of a Halloween night, or “Lake Eerie Omen” placing you at the water's edge, feeling the dread of knowing what's coming across the surface without hope of avoidance. The deep unease of standing on the outside looking in, the sinking feeling of being in over your head, of having missed something vital, as in “Gift,” “Dare You,” and “In Crowd.” There are evocative explorations of the intertwining of grief and anger in “The Vultures Remain” and “Cut Down,” stories that explore two very different types of losses and fury. Further variation in tone is provided by “I Won't Call it a Monster,” adding a satisfying empowerment to the mix.

A delicious folkloric offering makes an appearance in the haunting and excellent “Beisht Kione, Come Home.” Cuthbert reaches for inspiration into the sonnets of Shakespeare and Poe, in the haunting vibes of “No Rest

Nor Relief for You With Me Dead” and the stark commentary on beauty and perfection in “Wanted,” inspired by Poe’s “Annabel Lee.” There are cutting and touchingly empathetic glimpses into the female experience in “Falling to Pieces,” as well as the uneasy immersion into the dark and unsettling logic of covering pain and trauma. “Makeover” delivers a dread-inducing buildup of a wrongness you cannot stop.

With short, sharp slices from a mad doctor’s scalpel in the darkness, Cuthbert creates an unease that never lets up—threats and danger are always just out of sight, and no matter how solid the ground feels beneath your feet, you’re holding your breath as you turn each page. I was kept off kilter, left reeling from each brief encounter, the blood welling in the wake of a cut you only feel in the blade’s absence. The reader is propelled by empathy, emotion and fear to fly through the collection, each story a riptide that pulls you out into the deep before you know it.

Despite the groundlessness, there is empowerment woven throughout the collection, and this is central to the titular theme of self-made monsters. It’s no mistake that with so many takes on the monstrous included by Cuthbert, from those based solely on appearance, to perception, defined characteristics and subverting expectations, choices are made throughout. If we be monsters, let us make ourselves in the image we choose.

-Laurel Hightower, Bram Stoker Award® nominated author, *Below*, *The Day of the Door*, *Crossroads*, *Silent Key*, and more



# Section I



**the  
DEAD**

**the  
DAMNED**

**the  
DREAMING**

# No rest nor relief for you with me dead



Inspired by Shakespeare's Sonnet 71

No rest nor relief for you with me dead,  
than I shall thrice ring the gravedigger's bell—  
give fair warning to you, my dear, who shed  
my blood without tears, laughed long as it fell.

Nay, if you can sense me, remember not  
your adoring wife; for I loathe you so,  
that I in your nightmares won't be forgot—  
even in sleep will your dread of me grow.

O, if (I scream) you feel my sworn curse, from  
beneath (where you put me) six feet of clay,  
do not the grieving husband act rehearse,  
for soon, alongside me, will *you* decay.

Lest our friends believe your charlatan moans,  
I'll come for you, darling—I'm dead, not gone.

# Dare You



They had told Jade that accepting the dare would make her cool; that it would impress them, so she said yes, and that's how she found herself—after dark on the Friday night that marked the official start of winter break—treading the dusty floorboards of the abandoned Slater house on the far side of town.

Jade's town, but not always. She and her mom had moved there just three weeks before. The junior high was smaller than her old one, with cliques established since elementary school. But this friend group—Kaylee and Beth and Margo and Franky and Tim—were going to let her join.

As long as she could prove herself first.

It was as cold inside the Slater house as it was out—most of the windows were broken, and frosty air moaned in through the empty casements. Jade's snow boots were too heavy for tiptoeing, but she tried to walk carefully. Some of the floorboards were swollen with rainwater, and here and there, they'd rotted through.

Her friends had let her bring a flashlight but not her phone—“No calling for your mommy, wuss,” Margo had said, and the others laughed.

Jade hadn’t wanted to hand over her phone, but what could she do? She’d already accepted the dare.

She made it across the space that was probably a dining room, then through the living room—wallpaper hanging down from the walls like shed skin, twin chandeliers dangling low at strange angles—and to the base of the wooden staircase.

Now she had to go up.

She tested the first step. It creaked but held. She heard giggling outside—the others probably thought she wouldn’t do it. That she wouldn’t climb the stairs to the second story and go to the master bedroom, where Old Man Slater killed his wife and then himself, then lean out the window and wave.

Jade knew what she’d say when she did it. She’d yell down “Take that, chicken-shits!” And *she’d* laugh at *them*, then swagger back outside and tell them it was no big deal. She’d even practiced her shrug.

She said it to herself, quietly, as her other foot left the floor for the second step. “No big deal.” Another step. *Creak*. “No big deal.” The beam of her flashlight picked out cobwebs, shards of glass, a pile of newspapers on the landing in front of her where the stairs turned. She took another step and then another.

She was doing it.

She reached the landing when the pile of newspapers moved.

A rat the size of her snow boot skittered out from the yellowed pages, its high-pitched squeal deafening in that echoey space.

Jade jumped back.

Her boot broke through the warped wooden step where she landed. She sunk to her bleeding thigh, leg dangling in the empty space below the staircase. She screamed, dropped her flashlight to scramble for the rail, but she wasn't fast enough. The weight of her body was too much for the ruined steps.

She fell.

On the way down, she cracked her chin. The impact snapped her head back, gashing it open on the splintered wood.

Her heavy winter coat didn't do much to cushion her landing on the packed earth of the basement floor. She wanted to call for help, but her voice didn't work. She didn't know if her eyes were open or closed. She couldn't hear the wind anymore.

She couldn't hear the others talking or laughing, either; she couldn't have known that they were already gone, that they'd dropped her phone and run away as soon as her scream had ripped from the guts of that dilapidated old house.

Jade felt very tired, but not very cold.

She spent her last conscious moment wondering if she'd get another chance at the dare, or if this was it. If she'd blown her only shot at having friends.

Then, quiet as the snow falling outside, she drifted off.

# Gift



Why had Jessie landed in the counselor's office? They'd made necklaces at school before—macaroni and yarn in art class, dandelion chains on the playground. How was this one any different?

She'd made it over the weekend for her teacher, Ms. Kimmel, whose eyes were a warm coppery brown. The bodies of Japanese beetles matched them perfectly, and, inspired, Jessie had captured 47 of them in her grandmother's garden, first drowning, then drying them and using clear nail polish as a shellack. She strung them together with needle and thread, then curled the shining string of jewels into an empty Jell-o box for wrapping.

It was the most beautiful thing she'd ever made. The most beautiful thing she'd ever given away.

She stared at her lap, watching tears drip onto her folded hands, waiting for her name to be called.

# Cut Down



Florence couldn't understand it. Why move here, to rural New York, from Las Vegas, if you hate trees?

The new neighbor cleared them all, one by one, as soon as he bought the place. Shiny car, shiny wife, shiny bald head reflecting sunlight that burned down like a welder's torch now that he'd changed the landscape.

When her late husband built their house, it was only the second on the street. That was 1950, and black raspberries grew so thick on the roadside Florence could make three pies without even scratching her ankles; picking was that easy. Purple fingers for days, seeds stuck in her teeth, but who wouldn't appreciate that sweet, wild gift?



The tree service was there again today, pull-behind woodchipper already cranked up and buzzing, men in orange shirts and hardhats shading their



eyes, assessing how best to kill the last willow on the lot. A machine with an arm like a giant claw reached up, snapping branches bottom to top. The birds that could already abandoned their home, doomed now. Florence tried not to think of their babies, stuck, bawling, in their nests.

She didn't want to watch anymore. She dropped the curtain and moved back to the stove, thinking a cup of tea wouldn't hurt as long as she went easy on the sugar.

But even turned away, she couldn't help hearing.

A crack like a gunshot, a horrible ripping noise, a crash.

Florence put her hands over her ears, but she couldn't block the whine and scream of the woodchipper.

# The Vultures Remain



## The Vultures Remain

**T**he vultures show up on the Sunday of my mother's funeral: dark blots of ink lining the roof of the church.

Letty hasn't been at the house for days and doesn't show up now. Dad's eyes scan the parking lot and I know he's looking for her: the better twin. His favorite.

Instead he's got me, and between us we carry the weight of this day that should have been split into thirds.

My anger with Letty makes me feel like a traitor to my own grief. I should be focused on my mother, so wasted by her illness that we had to choose a closed casket service. *No one wants to remember her like that*, the funeral director said, except Letty and me already did, and Dad too: we watched her disappear for six long months, and none of us could look away.

Maybe that's why Letty left. She didn't want to see any more.



The priest drones on. The church is too hot; my hands sweat and I drop my rosary. When I lean over to pick it up, I catch one of the church ladies staring at me from across the aisle. She scrunches her face in a show of sympathy before looking away.

They're not fooling me, these parish wives and widows ranging from middle aged to old. I can see the ugly curiosity beneath their polite masks—mouthing condolences while wondering what our tragedy makes us: teenage girls un-mothered and a man unwillingly single. We are a show for them to watch. A drama unfolding in real time.

Of course they notice Letty's absence. It's what makes their eyes so bright.



In the receiving line I stand still as a statue, my face broken stone, hearing *Sorry, so sorry* as people walk out. The church ladies call me *honey* and *sweetheart* and *poor little lamb*. They squeeze my hand and pet my hair.

To me they are strangers. I mumble *thank you* or think I do—I'm not paying attention. Instead I wonder where my sister is. Three days ago she packed a bag while I begged her not to.

I watched out the window as some dude in a truck picked her up. I don't know where she finds these guys. I don't know why she bothers.

My mind snaps back as the last woman pats my shoulder and then holds Dad's hands too long. Finally she lets go and it's our turn to walk through the doors. After the heat of the church, the cold April air hits me like a slap.

The birds are still on the roof. When we drive to the VFW hall, they follow us.



Heavy bodies thunk and rustle on the roof as we walk in for the funeral luncheon, already in full swing.

Half-eaten potluck offerings line long tables against one wall. Smearred paper plates and crumpled napkins fill the rolling metal garbage cans. Dad and I make our way through the clog of dressed-up women and a few lost men until we find an empty table and sit down.

Dad shook hands and said *thank you* at the church, but now all he can muster when people stop to talk is a rhythmic head nod, like he's in a trance.

I glance from stranger to stranger, wishing I were anywhere but here. I'm mad at Letty but I'm jealous, too. She should be sitting at this sticky table with me, getting stared at by women drinking burnt coffee from Styrofoam cups stained with red and pink and orange lipstick.

One of them—a church lady in a dark purple dress—pushes a plate in front of me. It's loaded with potato salad, cold goulash, and some kind of

casserole. I swallow two bites, but it all tastes like wet ashes so I leave the rest untouched. Someone with peach-painted fingernails eventually reaches over my shoulder to take it away.

Across from me, Dad nods. Up and down. Up and down. I don't think he hears what anyone says. He doesn't eat either.

Two hours pass this way.



The vultures come with us when we leave. I see them in the rearview mirror of Dad's Honda, flying low in the sky like their leaden bodies can't rise any higher. By the time we park the car and get to the door they're perched on our roof, muttering in their clicking throaty bird language.

Our house is full of people and funeral flowers.

*We brought them so you have them to remember her by,* explains a smiling woman in a navy blue pantsuit. But cut flowers die faster than sick people, and to keep from spitting in her face I push past her into the living room. Dad nods and trails behind me like an untied shoelace.

It's like a florist's shop, but tackier.

Ribbon-decked vases of mums and carnations and roses and lilies cover every flat surface. They crowd the mantle and the tables; a few are on the floor. The heady smell makes me nauseous. I wish Dad would ask the people to leave so I could throw every arrangement into a black garbage bag, smash every vase, and then drag it all to the curb.

Instead, he sinks into the couch cushions. I sit next to him.

We don't talk.



After half an hour of strained nothingness, the next throng of church ladies arrives.

These are the ones who cleaned up after the luncheon, and they bring us half-eaten pies and salads in huge plastic bowls, everything covered in tinfoil. *We'll just put these in the freezer*, says one wearing a maroon sweater set. *Then you won't have to worry about dinner all week.* Dad gives her a vague smile, that same bobbing head nod.

I watch the afternoon turn to evening through the living room windows. With any luck, the women will take it as a cue to leave.

But my family isn't lucky.

After they pack the freezer the women clean the kitchen, putting things away where they don't belong. One of them washes the dishes. Another sweeps the hallway. I hear the vacuum going upstairs.

*Do you have any Ajax?* a woman in a green dress asks.

My father shrugs.

*No worries*, she says. *I'll keep looking.*



I feel guilty abandoning Dad, but I can't take the smell anymore and escape into the backyard. I kick through tall grass to get to the swing set Letty and I have outgrown. It used to be red and blue. Now it's the color of nothing. I swing a little, drag my feet, scuff my good church shoes. The metal bar above me, blistered with rust, groans with my shifting weight.

The sun sinks lower.

I wonder when Letty will come home.

If she'll come home.

I look up and see the birds are still on the roof, hunkered down like they're comfortable. Like they belong.

Their bright eyes watch me.

I lean over, picking through the grass beneath the swing set until I find a handful of the gravel Dad put down years ago. Then I stand and aim.

I miss. The gravel plinks harmlessly against the roof shingles, and the closest bird takes one calm step to the left.

I try again. This time I hit its wing.

It makes an ugly noise, so I make one back: a frustrated sob I've been holding in for hours. It flaps angry wings, disturbing the others. They puff up and mutter. I aim and throw again. This time I get one in the head.

I throw and miss, hitting my bedroom window. A woman's face appears in the glass, scowling.

I have a new target. I throw again. She draws back, surprised.

I need bigger stones.

Mom's rock garden.

I run to it and pull away rocks the size of apples, using the front of my skirt like a basket.

Now there are two women at the window.

I throw a rock. The window breaks. The women scream and it gives me an even better idea.

I round the side of the house at a jog, moving into the front yard. The women's cars line the street.

I throw a rock like a softball pitch. It hits the windshield of a beige Cadillac.

Next I fling one like a discus. It puts a dent in the side of a maroon Charger.

Before I can throw another, church ladies pour from the house like ants from a burning log. They pack together on my front porch, shrieking, yelling for me to stop.

Instead, I laugh.

I have three rocks left. I get a blue Tucson with one, a beige Ford Flex with another. I wind up to throw the third when someone catches my wrist from behind.

I spin.

It's Dad.

I drop the rock and collapse into his chest, soak his dress shirt with snot and tears, scream about Mom. The word *why* comes out over and over.

He holds me for a long time with both arms, and then just one, because another body is pressing close to mine and he has to make room.

Letty.

Her tangled red hair falls against my face. She hugs me so tight it hurts my ribs. *I'm sorry* she says at the same time I say *I needed you*.

When my chest stops heaving and Letty's stops too, I look up. The porch is empty. The dented cars are gone.

I check the roof. The vultures remain.



My family and I walk back to the house, still clumped together.  
I close the door behind us and Letty turns the lock.

# Wanted



Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee"

The young starlet was  
flattered when they  
wanted her likeness in the  
seaside wax museum.  
In a chilly studio  
she stood for hours,  
perfectly still  
while the artist used a hair  
dryer to soften the mass  
of yielding paraffin.  
She understood the magic  
in his sculptor's hands;  
when he shaped  
her waxen thighs,  
her waxen breasts,  
she swore she felt his touch

on her own hot skin.

Electricity

thrummed along her

spine, keeping time

with the blues riff

that leaked from tinny

speakers.

But the artist was too

good, or she wasn't

good enough—her

true body unconvincing,

her small voice

lost—and they've all

mistaken her for her effigy.

Now she waits out her days

behind a velvet

rope, frozen as tourists

in cheap flipflops gawk.

She wishes

she could shudder

when they stretch

their sweating fingers

to touch her.

# With Her



Sarah, dressed as her favorite superhero, bounced up and down on the couch, ready to go trick-or-treating with her mother.

But she overheard Caitlin, her older sister, making plans to go out with friends. Sarah wanted to go with her, instead.

She cried, howled, scrunched her face like a used tissue, until she got her way.

Caitlin sighed and stomped and rolled her eyes, to no avail. She was saddled with her baby sister, whom she'd resented since their parents' bitter divorce.

They left the house at seven. Caitlin seethed behind a devil mask and texted her friends a storm of expletives, wishing, like always, that she were an only child.

Sarah skipped alongside her, red cape billowing, caught up in the wind.

Wet brown leaves decorated the pavement.

The shouts of children echoed.

Streetlights fought against the dusk.



An hour later, Sarah's plastic pumpkin, heavy with candy, dragged her little arm down. She had struggled to keep up with the teenagers, panicking more than once when she lost them in a crowd of painted faces.

She wanted to go home.

When she told Caitlin, her sister said "Fine, go ahead." And Caitlin meant it. The teenagers laughed and kept walking.

Sarah's face burned.

Another block. Another. They passed fewer trick-or-treaters. Porch lights winked out.

Sarah tried again, calling Caitlin's name twice before her sister turned around. Careful to keep the whine from her voice, Sarah asked her to slow down, to hold her hand, to carry her loot.

Caitlin said no.

Sarah fought tears and tripped on an uneven sidewalk, spilling her candy. She stopped to pick it up, setting down her pumpkin to chase rolling packs of Smarties and Sweetarts.

Caitlin glanced back and groaned. The little brat was always such a pain in the ass. She told her friends she'd catch up and backtracked to Sarah, crossing her arms while her sister scrambled.

A rusty car lurched slowly toward them and pulled to the curb. The driver, a woman with long tangled hair and a frozen smile, opened the passenger side window and leaned across the seat.

She called hello; asked if “the little one” was alright.

“Thanks, just tired,” answered Caitlin, pushing up her mask. *And annoying*, she thought.

“Are those your friends, up ahead?” said the stranger. Caitlin nodded yes. “Why don’t you let me help? I can take the child; you deserve to have fun. You won’t be young and lovely forever, right?” She laughed.

Sarah straightened and moved to stand behind Caitlin. She gripped the handle of her pumpkin with both hands.

Caitlin looked from the woman to her sister and back. Then she checked her phone. Past 8. Sarah needed to be home soon, but Caitlin’s friends wanted to meet up with a few guys at the old playground. Ben would be there; Sarah wanted to lick his teeth.

“Well?” said the woman. She pushed the passenger side door open. It scraped against the curb. Empty candy wrappers spilled from the car and skittered away on the breeze.

Caitlin turned her head; her friends were getting farther away.

“Sarah,” Caitlin said. “You know our address, right?”

Sarah nodded. It was 63 Martin Street. Her mother had made her memorize it.

“Good,” said Caitlin. This was her chance. She stepped to the side and gave Sarah a little push forward. “Go on. Go with her.”

Then she turned and jogged toward her friends, never once looking back.

Sarah got in the car.

The woman shut the door, hit the lock button, and drove away.



Wet brown leaves decorated the pavement.

Silence echoed.

Brake lights vanished in the dark.

# Falling to Pieces



**I**t was a tiny tear at first—barely noticeable.

Just her left ring finger detaching a bit. No big deal. Leah added a strip of silver duct tape and hid that with a flesh-colored bandage, then she got back to work, answering the phone and greeting customers and hustling hustling hustling at Giovanni's Ristorante in the city's second-trendiest neighborhood.

By the next weekend the finger had come clean off, and the other four fingers on that hand were separating too, but Leah fixed it with more duct tape and fancy, elbow-length gloves that she sort of liked. They made her feel elegant, even though she was just handing out menus and wine lists and rolls of polished silverware.

Plus, with her hands covered and especially her left one, random dudes sitting at the bar stopped making bad jokes about how she wasn't wearing a ring—a precursor, Leah knew, to hitting on her which would never go their way, because all *she* wanted was for Christine, the bartender with the cropped red hair and capable hands, to notice her.



She willed Christine to look at her in quiet moments, thinking hard at her, feeling harder. But Christine didn't, or at least not when Leah was looking at her, and the fall months passed and Leah taped her fingers on and brushed lint from her black gloves after rolling silverware, and she looked and she sighed but Christine, whose hands moved like a street magician's trick in the bar's recessed lighting, didn't look back.



In January things got worse.

Leah's right foot snapped off as she was leaving work on an icy Thursday night. She cursed as she landed in gray sidewalk slush that soaked her thighs numb—cursed the heels she wore, the city she lived in, the bleak winter that seemed in the muffled frozen thick of it like it would never, never end.

Giovanni, whose real name was Gary but no one was allowed to call him that, insisted the hostesses wear black high heels, black dresses too short to comfortably bend over in and jewelry if they wanted, but only if it looked expensive.

No pants. No long skirts. No boots. So, no tape.

And how would Leah attract Christine or anyone else for that matter if she couldn't even keep herself together, couldn't keep herself composed, couldn't do the basic, impossible job of being a whole, sufficient woman?

She tucked her foot into her purse and let her tears join the slush and gravel and road salt she crawled through to get to her car at the far end of

the narrow parking lot.



The superglue had to be reapplied every two to three hours, and chipped bone at the ankle meant her foot didn't fit exactly back into place. Leah hoped customers wouldn't look down as she led them to their tables. She tried not to limp or wince or grimace or tell the truth when people asked, out of politeness and not curiosity, how she was doing.

And she reminded herself, every day in the mirror, first thing in the morning and before bed at night, that she was making it work. More or less.

Some days less. Most days, less. And Christine still wasn't looking back at her, or maybe she was but how could Leah know and even if Christine was, it wasn't—it probably wasn't—the same way Leah looked at her.

And trying to problem-solve loose body parts was a slippery slope, Leah found. Before she knew it, she was overcompensating and solutions became their own troubles.

Leah focused on her face and head, hoping to distract people from her foot and hand that, she knew, flopped a little when she wasn't careful. She braided in hair extensions, sweeping them over her shoulder in a low ponytail she hoped Christine would like. Dangling rhinestone earrings shimmered in the candleflicker of Giovanni's mood-lit dining room and brought out the gold flecks in her gray eyes. Fringed, fake lashes added drama or at least the illusion of it.

When she passed Christine on her way to the kitchen for more clean silverware on a busy night in mid-February, ponytail drooping and sweat smudging her eye makeup, Christine looked back.



It was near the end of March when the hair extensions, growing out by then, pulled part of Leah's scalp free from her skull. It folded over her ear like a banana peel—her ear which, Leah saw with dismay, was tearing away from her head, top to bottom, dragged down by her fabulous earrings.

Also, the fake lashes weren't doing her eyelids any favors.

She bought more superglue and at work, tried to hide her face from Christine, even though now, Christine looked back more times than she didn't.

Giovanni noticed something was wrong—maybe not quite what, but he told Leah at the end of a Friday shift that she'd been looking unkempt and he didn't know if it was emotional problems or what, but if she didn't clean herself up he was going to have to put her in the back as a salad girl, if he kept her on at all.

So Leah tried harder. Double-sided tape, smaller earrings, staples, an expensive wig. Keeping her weight on her left foot for a six-hour shift wasn't easy and after the last diner left and she could blow out the candles and wipe down the menus and sweep beneath the tables, she was spent.

It got harder and harder to face herself in the mirror as she repeated her mantra, as she told herself she was doing it, she was making it work, she'd

figure it out, she'd keep figuring it out, it would all work out.

And in better news or worse, depending, Christine looked at her three times in the first week of April alone—as Christine washed bar glasses and Leah rolled silverware, as Christine restocked the wine rack and Leah Clorox-wiped doorknobs, as Christine stood, motionless, behind the bar and Leah stopped, mid-stride, on her way to turn the muzak down.

But Leah didn't have the nerve to talk to Christine—not now, not with the way Leah was feeling and what she looked like, despite her best efforts. A smashed marionette.

Giovanni kept a close eye on her, and Leah tried to stand up straight at the hostess podium, to smile with teeth at him and at every guest who walked through the doors—an act both aggressive and compliant, a sign hard to read, a weapon against suspicion and small talk.

Her teeth, at least, were whole and even.



On a Monday night in May, a night that was busier than it should have been long after the dinner rush with the kitchen closed and last call called, half the bar stools still sat full. Three businessmen sucked down flights of craft beer, a woman in a dress that was probably Versace sipped white wine, and an old guy held a glass of straight bourbon in his gnarled fingers but didn't drink it.

Too many people to fall down in front of, though even half that number would have been, but that's what Leah did. She'd forgotten to reapply the

superglue holding her foot on, and when she headed toward the kitchen to run the candleholders through the dishwasher well—it just broke off, easy as half a graham cracker at the seams.

She fell forward, catching herself on one of the red leather bar stools thankfully unoccupied. She hauled herself up and onto it after hopping twice on her remaining foot, wishing she could dissolve into the grout between the fake marble floor tiles.

People stared, of course, it not being a daily occurrence to see a foot lying apart from its rightful owner. But then Giovanni came around the corner and he saw too, and his face darkened to the shade of russet potatoes, fists clenching into angry little balls.

He took a few steps toward Leah when someone—Christine—shoved him aside.

“Move, Gary,” she said, “I’m going on break,” and maybe because he was surprised, or maybe because he was embarrassed by his boring name being said out loud, he did move, sidestepping to take Christine’s place behind the bar.

Leah watched all this through a blur of tears. She felt like a jackass in front of these people, in front of Christine, but she was scared, too—she needed this job, and worried, because if she’d damaged her ankle further, how would she ever get her foot to stay on? But none of those emotions had time to seep in fully because Christine was heading straight for her, looking straight at her, and Leah held her breath.

Christine leaned over and picked up Leah’s foot. Then she approached and bent to one knee, holding up the foot like an offering, like it was something precious, and being one of the only two feet Leah had, of course, it was.

Leah looked miserably at her retrieved foot but then noticed, for the first time because she'd never been this close to Christine before, the tiny, careful stitches holding Christine's hands on. The thread matched the insides of her pale wrists perfectly, looking more like textured skin than lines of silk or nylon. The precision was beautiful.

Leah exhaled and whispered "Yours, too?" She took her foot back, fingertips brushing Christine's.

"Mine, too," Christine said. Half her mouth bent into a smile and she stood, wrapping an arm around Leah's waist to help her up.

Leah smiled back without showing her teeth and together, the women rounded the bar, heading for the kitchen and the restaurant's back door and, hopefully, Leah thought and maybe Christine did too, toward something else still too fragile to name.

But "*Leah*" Giovanni said before they got far and his voice was a sharp knife; the women stopped. He gripped the edge of the bar and leaned toward them. "You better pull yourself together by the weekend. I mean it."

Leah thought he probably did, and as she and Christine pushed through the swinging doors and whatever was going to happen, she thought she probably would pull herself together but maybe, also, she wouldn't, and if not, well, there would always be whatever happened after that, the next bridge to come to, to look at, to cross perhaps or maybe not, but she didn't have to think about any of it at that moment, and instead she concentrated on how Christine's hand felt snug around her torso, like she was holding Leah together, and how nice it felt to be held together, how, right there and then even with her detached foot clenched in her hand like a prize she'd earned and not lost, things were more or less and actually more than less okay. Maybe better, even, than that.

# The Reservoir



Everyone used to know enough about the reservoir not to go near it, but that was back when the town had a newspaper and folks had memory enough to keep the drownings in mind—a father and son fishing, a couple on a date, that one policeman.

Fear bought the reservoir its solitude.

Trees and scrub bushes grew to hide its still surface. No footprints broke its silty banks.

But kids will find danger, hidden or not.

And on that August afternoon—so hot, nothing to warn them away—they learned the reservoir's secrets but didn't live to tell them.

# Section II



**the  
VEXED**

**the  
VICIOUS**

**the  
VENGEFUL**

\*Reader Advisory: These stories and poems depict or reference violence, grief, rage, death, murder, sexual situations, assault, and bullying.



# Lake Erie Omen



You call me an *omen*, good or ill,  
but I have a name and it's not *Bessie*—  
that tourist's barb, that cheap  
shot glass logo.

But how could you  
land-locked brutes  
understand?

You with your broken scavengers'  
tongue; mine deep-  
toned chantings from  
nightmares long since  
dreamt.

Do you know what I've done  
with your zebra mussels?

Did you think their weak shells  
could colonize me, too?

Foolish men,  
I wear them like jewels,  
like the crown I've surely  
earned—for who else would spend eons  
ruling over this lakebed?

Doling out petty fates for  
lesser monsters like you?

Don't think I do not mark you, always,  
standing on the shore,  
pretending not to see me, *stupid*—  
driftwood doesn't blink.

You know the lore:  
to spy me with dry feet on sand  
foretells a death by water.

It may be a drowning, or something with  
more flair: your neck caught in a coil of rope,  
a slippery deck and a step misplaced.

But if, as they say, you're lost  
in a storm, flimsy boat tossed like litter,  
like the floating trash you are—  
I might afford you pity—*me*,  
your queen of scale and bone.

# In Crowd



It seemed odd to Marge—a costume party? At their age? But George said no, not costumes—more like ceremonial garb, to ring in the new year. And hadn't she worn a choir robe each Sunday back at the Presbyterian Church in Boise? Hadn't George worn his academic regalia at every U of I graduation, and would again, here at Seattle U? He was right, of course. And with the decade about to change over—1960!—what better time to try something different?

“Come on, honey,” he said. “I want us to fit in.”

She wanted that, too—to be invited to potlucks and the coupon club and the garden society. So Marge put on the dark, shapeless frock and half-length veil George had brought home, and he dressed to match—though he wore a robe with a zip front, not a gown, and a mask instead of a veil. To complete her look, Marge painted her lips a deep shade of red and strapped on stiletto heels. If the party theme was “sexy mourner,” she told herself, she'd be dead on.



At first, it was the usual small talk. “How was the move?” and “Are you settling in okay?” and “Does George like the new job?” Then compliments on the decor and the catered food and the heady red wine served by handsome young men in vests who kept the guests’ glasses full. Cigar smoke and laughter. Lively music, one record after another, spinning on the hi-fi. The only thing that made this party different from any other academic-crowd get-together Marge had attended with George over the years was the dress code: women shrouded in swaths of dark fabric, men in matching robes. Everywhere, obscured faces.

Marge was tipsy within the first hour. But the waiters kept filling her glass and her new friends told her to drink up, and since it was a party, she did. After two hours, tipsiness gave way to a comfortable drunk. She laughed at bawdy jokes and smoked a cigarette someone offered. She even danced twice with Ed, the chair of George’s department, who slid his hand up her dress to squeeze her bottom and sighed when Marge’s hands returned the compliment.

Three hours in and approaching midnight, a pleasant warmth spread through Marge’s body, loosening her limbs as she swayed with the music. Lights were turned down and glasses filled up and Marge swallowed more of the sweet, spicy wine. A trickle leaked from the side of her mouth and fell onto her dress, disappearing into the black fabric.

Then the music stopped, and the lights winked out.

Whispers in the dark. Heated bodies pressing in.

Marge wanted to find George, but didn't trust her feet to move. The room spun. She closed her eyes and opened them again when she felt someone slide behind her, put an arm around her waist and pull her close.

"George?" she whispered, half turning, but "Shhh" Ed said into her ear, holding her tighter. "The fun's starting," he breathed. "Watch."

Candles flared, illuminating the coffee table in the center of the room. Party guests crowded in to form a loose circle. Music started, but not for dancing. These notes were slow, twisting, and ran up against monotone chanting in a language Marge didn't recognize. Chanting and humming, too, humming that came from all around her and then, she realized, from her own chest.

More candles were lighted. Blurred faces flickered, teasing through the dark. George, there, across the circle, not alone. Holding onto someone, a blonde woman, the way Ed held onto Marge, moving behind the blonde the way Ed moved behind her, and it felt nice and Marge hoped George felt nice too, and she knew Ed felt nice from the way his chanting stuttered and hitched, and she knew the blonde felt nice from the way her mouth opened in an O and she stopped humming, so Marge hummed for her, louder and louder.

Next to George and the woman, two men writhed against one another. A partnerless woman kneeled in front of them and touched herself.

Then, pushed onto the coffee table—knocking candles over, making it harder to see—one of the waiters. No vest now, no shirt, dark material gagging his mouth with more binding his wrists. His handsome face looked serene, though, not worried, so Marge didn't worry either, just reached back to clasp Ed's thigh and bend lower, her eyes moving from George and the

blonde to the youth on the table, someone hoisting dark skirts to straddle his chest.

It was the hostess. Marge couldn't remember her name. Janine? Eileen? But then Ed moved faster and Marge closed her eyes, still humming, humming, and then Janine-or-Eileen called out "To the new decade!" and Ed shuddered and Marge opened her eyes. Candlelight glinted off something metallic and there was so much blood; someone caught it in a silver pitcher while others leapt forward, cupping their hands, lapping at their palms, voices yelling "Happy New Year!"

Ed pushed Marge toward them.

Then, again, a flood of darkness.



George tugged on Marge's hand, pulling her toward their sedan, parked down the block from the party. Her heels rang out on the sidewalk and she looked behind her to see other people in dark dresses getting into other parked cars, beeping and waving as they drove away.

"Time to go home?" she said to George, who was smiling, and he said "Not quite, love," and drew her close to kiss her hard, then helped her into the back seat, not the front, where he murmured into her neck, asking if she liked watching him and the blonde, if she liked the way Ed touched her, if she liked the ceremony's finale.

Marge looked at her hands, smeared dark in the streetlights' glow. She recalled the waiter's bare bleeding chest; felt, again, the stir of desire.

She pushed George beneath her, leaned down and whispered *Yes Yes Yes*.

# Reckoning



**M**arissa hadn't even wanted to go to the party. When she heard Hannah scream from upstairs, she took the steps two at a time, crashing into a bedroom musky with sweat.

The scene wasn't what she expected.

Rage twisted her best friend's face. Hannah's shaking hands still clutched the bat.



# Makeover



“What are we doing with this one?” asked Renee, Pamela’s uncertified surgical assistant.

The Sculpting Clinic was world known, at least in certain, whispering circles. Clients were mostly women, but men came in too—not that the clinic’s services came cheap for any body. Patients submitted willing flesh and blank checks to Pamela, The Body Sculptor, agreeing to a *carte blanche* plastic surgery makeover. Perfectly legal, at least in this country. Pamela was an artist, after all. If people wanted basic nips and tucks, they could stay in the U.S. and pull over at any suburban L.A. strip mall.

Renee circled that afternoon’s client, the woman’s naked, unconscious form laid out on the operating table like a spring picnic. Renee was more than an assistant, really—she was an apprentice. At least that’s how she thought of herself, here to learn from the master. Ever faithful, she’d followed Pamela from state to state and then country to country, outrunning laws and lawsuits and license revocations until they’d found this blessed safe harbor where they could work in peace and impunity.

But with freedom to practice came a certain boredom for Pamela. Renee heard it lately in her sighs and caught her, often, staring out her office window at the back alley's brick wall.

She saw it again now. "Doctor?" she said. She only called her *Pamela* in her head.

Pamela spoke without looking at Renee, her eyes assessing the corpse-like figure on the steel table. "I'm sick of breast augmentations and removals. Ass injections. Facial rearrangements."

"You're evolving," said Renee, liking the way the word wrapped around her tongue.

Silence.

Then, "I'm evolving," Pamela repeated. And again. "I'm evolving."

And just like that it was back—the fevered, glorious look of an artist inspired by a blank canvas and her own simmering genius. The look that gave Renee's life direction and purpose so long ago. She felt a throb low in her sea-green scrubs. But she told herself it was mostly professional admiration she felt for Pamela, the awe of a rapt student. Mostly. She swallowed and gave her capped head a little shake. Focus, she told herself, on the art. The process. She pressed play on the stereo in the corner; barely perceptible acid jazz seeped into the room.

Then Pamela grabbed the purple surgical marker Renee held out to her like a baton. She drew in a frenzy, long slashes across the woman's chest, dotted lines on her thighs, squares on her sagging stomach. Something like a spiral on her neck. Then she stood back and looked to Renee, waiting.

She hesitated. The heart rate monitor beeped once, twice, three times.

"Wow," she said finally, because that's what she always said, and why rock the boat now? This woman would stand out in a crowd. That's what all

Pamela's clients wanted, anyway—not to fade into the background. “So... Avant-garde,” she continued. “Almost... Cubism? Expressionism?” She bit her lip. Her turn to wait.

Silence.

But it was the right thing.

Pamela grinned and pulled up her face mask. Renee let out the breath she'd held trapped in her chest and got ready to suction.

# Estuary



“Come to the estuary” she says  
and her fingers are fishnets holding me fast;  
“Don’t worry about the dark” she says  
and her laugh is an old song I can’t remember;  
“I’ve been here such a long time” she says  
and her sigh is a creaking rope pulled taut;  
“Wade in deeper with me” she says  
and her shimmering skin is moonlight on glass;  
“I want you to hear what I hear” she says  
and her arms are lead anchors yanking me down;  
“Stay” she says  
and her voice is a foghorn—

a keening—  
a moaning—  
a warning too late.

# I Won't Call It a Monster



Jack's great-grandfather told his son never to chop down the gnarled old tree and Jack's grandfather told *his* son never to chop down the gnarled old tree and Jack's father told *Jack* never to chop down the gnarled old tree but Jack, my stupid fucking husband Jack, went and chopped it down.

Well, he tried to, anyway.

He stopped when something, some actual goddamn *thing*, took our daughter.

I haven't decided, yet, whether or not I'm going to leave him.

Would you? If you were me? Would you leave him?



I bet you would.

Anyway. I'll back up. It was four days ago. A perfect Sunday afternoon, here. It's his family's cabin. Passed down father to son for four generations.

Cammy loved it here. No—*loves* it here. How can I be talking like my six-year-old is past tense? My baby who will turn seven in August and who loves horses and wants to be a ninja when she grows up.

I've explained what happened that day twenty times. To the local cops, to the sheriff's department, to the staties, to some guy in sunglasses and a black suit from god-knows-what government agency. And now, you too. Where did you say you're from again?

[REDACTED]

More initials? Fine. I don't care anyway.

I'll tell you the same as I told them—*all* of them. Not that it did any good—not that any of them have *found* her. I don't blame them, though. No. I blame Jack.

Cammy had been playing on the lawn, piling the cut grass into a giant bird's nest and trying to get Roscoe, our dachshund, to curl up inside of it with her.

"Mommy, we're baby birds!" she called to me.

I was on the patio, drinking iced tea. The ice cubes rattled in the glass. Four ice cubes. I don't think I'll ever drink iced tea again. I'll taste that day. Sorry. I'm rambling.

I said something like "That's nice" or "I see," and she laughed. That's the last sound I really remember hearing from my daughter. Her laugh.

Earlier, Jack had told me the gnarled old tree in the back corner, closest to the woods, had to go. He said it was an eyesore, that it looked diseased, and that if he got rid of it, he could build a shed there. "It'll be so much more practical," he said. "We shouldn't just store the mower under a tarp."

And now, I can't help thinking that he sacrificed our daughter for a lawn mower.

[REDACTED]

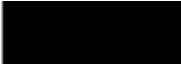
I know it's not really like that. Jack is heartbroken too. We sob in different rooms, but between my moans and heaving I hear his. With that eye patch he's like a sad fucking pirate.

When he told me that, though, about cutting down the tree, I told him "Don't. Your dad said not to, and his dad said not to—"

Jack cut me off with a laugh. That annoying nasally laugh. He said "Yeah, and his father before him. Superstitious old farts. It's just a tree, hon. An ugly old tree."


And it was a little ugly. Its trunk all squat and mottled, gray and brown and green, like the melted version of a prettier tree. Branches twisted. Not many leaves—I think it's an oak? And the funny thing is—not *funny*, not really—is that in a way Jack was right. That tree is diseased. Just not in the way he thought.

Diseased and cursed are the same, right?



Anyway. He found a rusted axe in the basement—the basement is full of old tools. Tools and spiders. And he brought it up and put it over his shoulder like Paul Bunyan and whistled as he walked over to the tree.

Are you sure I can't get you coffee? Tea? I drink a lot of coffee. I don't sleep.



Cammy was well away from the tree; I made sure of that. I don't want you to think I'm a bad mom. Though you probably do. When kids go missing, that's what people say, right? *Where were the parents? What were they doing?* But I'll tell you. Cammy and Roscoe were playing in the grass.

I was sitting on the patio. And Jack walked across the yard, to the far corner, with an ancient axe and too much confidence, and started whacking.

At first nothing happened. The axe barely chipped that scaley gray bark. So Jack swung harder—since I had told him not to do it, his pride was involved—and harder. He got through, making three or four cuts, and he was sweating, still trying to whistle for the show of it but he was out of breath, and he hit it again and chunks of wood went flying and he'd gotten a good bite into it—you saw it, I know. I watched you through the window earlier, taking pictures. And that's when the idiot got a splinter of wood in his eye, because he didn't bother with safety glasses.

“Shit!” he yelled, and he put a hand over his eye, and doubled over. And I yelled back “What?” or something like that, “What's wrong,” whatever you say when someone does that, and he said something about his eye and he ran past Cammy and then past me into the house.

I set my glass down on the table. The ice cubes rattled. I was about to go after my husband—to see if we needed to find an Urgent Care, see how bad it was—I had already taken two or three steps toward the back door.

Do you have a husband? Is he a moron, too?



Good for you.

So like I said, I was heading for the back door. But then Roscoe barked.

Roscoe isn't a yappy dog. I know you probably think he is, because he's a little dog, but he's not—he only has two barks. One is for when he's really happy. It's more high pitched. And the other is lower, and he only does it when he sees something that scares him.



Usually, I only hear him bark that bark if it's thundering out, or if the FedEx guy comes to the door. I don't know why, but he doesn't mind the mailman or the UPS guy.

Anyway. I turned around.

Cammy was standing right next to the tree. She was staring into it, into the gash Jack had cut in it. That gash—it looks like a mouth, have you noticed?



Look again. It does.

She was staring into it, and I didn't know how stable the tree was, like if it would fall and snap, crush her under its weight. So I hollered.

“Cammy, get away!”

And now that I'm thinking of it, now that I'm telling the story for the millionth time, I'm wondering. Do you think some of it is my fault, too? Like maybe if I hadn't yelled, the thing wouldn't have been, I don't know, *alerted* to her presence.

Do you think so?



Okay. Maybe not. Well then—I'm sorry. Would you hand me one of those tissues? This part is hard to get through.

Thank you.

Something came *out* of the tree. Not from behind it—the police already tried to convince me that it was someone hiding in the woods. A kidnapper. No. I know the difference between a flesh-and-blood human and—and whatever that—whatever *it* was.

And please don't tell me *that corner of the property is dark, how can I be sure, blah blah*. I know. It's all shade and shadow, even in midday. And I'm telling you—I'm telling *all* of you—that something thin and lanky and black leaned out of that goddamn tree and took my daughter.

It was like ooze. Like it wasn't entirely solid. Kind of like—like it didn't have solid edges, do you know what I mean?

[REDACTED]

Of course you don't. And from the look on your face I can tell you don't believe me. But its edges were like gasoline in a puddle of rainwater. Indistinct. Shifting. It looked stretched. Long head, long torso, long arms with too many joints. Skinny. And hands with fingers that reminded me of spiders' legs.

Sometimes, in my nightmares, it's a giant spider that's taken her. Do you think that would be better or worse?

[REDACTED]

Stop calling me “ma’am.”

Well its—its—

[REDACTED]

No, I can do this, thank you. Its fucking spider fingers reached out and grabbed my little girl. Grabbed her by the neck. And I screamed. I might have screamed her name—that I can't remember: what I screamed. It was probably her name...

Well it grabbed her and it pulled her inside.

[REDACTED]

Inside the *tree*.

It was like...like the gash in the tree opened up. I told you it looks like a mouth. It was like the mouth opened, and gagged out this...



No. I won't call it a monster.

This *creature*. This creature that crawled out of the tree and grabbed my Cammy and wrapped her in those long, awful arms and looked up at me—it had eyes, just milky blank spots, I mean what kind of thing has eyes like *that?*—and when it did, I felt absolute emptiness. Like every bit of light and love and goodness in the world was dead and gone. Like time stopped. And I remember wishing I were dead, too, so I didn't have to go on feeling it.

Then it took her. Pulled her back inside with it.



That's what I'm saying.

They were there and then they weren't. I don't even think Cammy screamed. Or maybe she did, and mine drowned hers out. Mine and Roscoe's—he was still barking that low, frightened bark.

I ran as soon as my legs could move. It was half a second, but that was too long. I ran across the yard to the tree, Roscoe at my heels. Jack came out of the house, an ice pack over his eye, yelling "What? What's going on?" but the tree was how he'd left it—how Jack had—with its gash like a mouth and a black, oozy inside and twisted, creaking branches but no Cammy.



Jack didn't believe me either.

He called 911. The police came. They brought tracking dogs. Roscoe hated it—I had to lock him inside. But the tracking dogs never left the

property. Because like I told the police, *Cammy* never left the property.

She's in that tree.

Or wherever that tree goes to.



How should I know? This place belonged to Jack's family, not mine. If some great-great-someone trapped that thing in there, if they knew what it was, what it could do—they sure as hell didn't leave us any notes about it. Just that simple warning Jack ignored.

You aren't any different from them, are you? Nicer suit, expensive haircut. Designer heels. But you won't find her either.

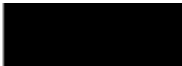
So it's up to me.

There have to be shovels downstairs with all the other shit. I'll find one and I'll dig. Wherever that thing has her, I'll find her.

And after I do, I'm going to burn that fucking tree to the ground.

Write that in your little notebook.

All set?



Then get the fuck off my property.

I'm wasting daylight.

# Beisht Kione, Come Home



“**W**hat’s a bonnie lass doing in a place like this,” you ask, or try to. I’ve heard it before and I’ll tell it again: I fell in love.

The ship wasn’t new, but seafaring, safe, the captain said. “She’ll get you where you’re going,” and we believed him, my sisters and I, immigrating to Canada, a land we didn’t know, leaving Ireland behind. We had a single case between us three—traveling light, because we had so little.

It was the third night at sea. We woke to the clanging of bells—they rang doom, we knew, we’d been told: *If you hear the bells, pull on your warm clothing and run, quick as you can, to the deck—make for the lifeboats.* But how were we to run in that storm? When the deck was slanting, the mast cracking overhead like a demon, the rain lashing down so hard against our skin it felt like flung gravel? We slipped; of course we did, and with every railing ruined, there was nothing to keep us from falling, from plunging, all three of us, each screaming the others’ names, into those foul waters.

We could swim a little, but not enough. Who could, in those frothing, angry waves, the lifeboats lost or sunk? Sailors and other passengers

drowned around us, clinging to flotsam one minute and gone the next, swallowed up forever. Ruthie and wee Ky landed not far from me; they held hands and reeled, Ky having pulled Ruthie up from where she'd slipped under, grabbing onto something that may have been most of a whiskey barrel.

Two swells away from my terrified sisters, I clung to a bit of decking.

I don't know how long we lasted that way, in lightning and thunder and waves crashing down. It felt like hours, but likely as not was only moments. Our fingers throbbed numb, our bodies were frozen. We couldn't hold on. Couldn't keep up kicking when our legs were slabs of ice.

We let go; though that sounds like we meant to, doesn't it? I tell you we didn't. More like we were claimed by the ocean and its depths, sucked under.

Through my stinging eyes, then, I saw him. Murky at first, but he swam nearer, curious, full sure, at three lasses pitching in the storm waves. Ky and Ruthie saw him too—I know because we surfaced for a moment and I heard Ky scream, or thought I did, but now as I think it may have been the wind.

Lightning split the sky and we went under again—that's when our poor Ruthie sank, her lovely eyes staring open and dead. I don't know what happened to Ky—she was gone from me, that's all I can tell.

I like to imagine she was rescued, though, that she's in Canada now with a doting fella and three fat weans.

But me, there in the brine, bobbing, he thought to save.

One moment, underneath the waves, he was shining and black, sleek as an eel, scales and a tail tipped with blades, eyes like lighted candlewicks in a fearsome dragon's face. He wrapped that tail round me, but instead of squeezing he pulled, up and up, until we broke the surface, and then he was

a man, or something like one, a fine thing, just as black, still sleek, but with arms holding me like I was precious to him. I remember gulping the air, retching saltwater, and then I remember nothing.

Until I woke in his cave.

Our cave.

He brought me here, you see, laid me down safe on this sandy bank. Gave me oysters and fish to eat, and freshwater carried in a salvaged sailor's flask. He made a fire with dried pieces of sunken ships and sang to me as my leg mended and my bruises cleared.

I ask you, now, does a monster do that?

Aye, I knew well what he was. Our da and his and every other half-cut tosser in our village told the stories—Beisht Kione, vicious creatures, they said, all scales and fins and tails sharp enough to pierce a hull; they turned over boats, dragged men to their deaths, dined on sailors' flesh and bones.

Fair play; so he does, but don't look at me like that. He doesn't tip their boats—the storms do that on their own, with no help from my love.

He leaves for days at a time like this. Out scavenging, for both of us. When he's gone it's like part of me is, too, and I fret until he returns. I picture calamity, misadventure, murder. I think of what, if they could, the boggers in my village would do to him, and I shiver.

If he gave you half a chance, you'd do the same, wouldn't you?

Full sure, you would. But you don't scare me. You, washed up here, looking like I did, not so long ago—shipwrecked body broken and bleeding.

The way you're holding my hand, your eyes pleading, teary—you expect mercy, I know. You think we are kindred; that I owe you kindness, because we called the same land home.

No.

I am only beholden to my love—for saving me, for minding me, for feeding me and joining with me, tenderly, here on this very sand as the wind and the world and men like you rage on outside.

He will return soon—my love—and when he does, he will see that I've made of you a present. A token of thanks for all he's given me.

Gather yourself; he's not without pity. He'll use his tail to break your neck. I promise you'll feel nothing.

Then after he's sated, leaves the water and shifts, I'll slip out of these manky rags, these scraps of tattered sailcloth. We'll roll on the sand and lay twined in the shallows, my body proving to his how dearly he was missed.

The way I always welcome him home.



# I Take



**T**he kiddies don't know that when I give to them I take for myself—a little of their essence, their energy, traded for measly chocolate bars.

I drink in their shining eyes behind skull masks and grease paint; when they say “Trick or treat!” I swallow puffs of their candy-scented breath, sweet as it glides across my tongue and down my throat, into my lungs, my bloodstream.

Beneath the sugar buzz, can they feel their bones soften, just a bit? Do they notice they're shorter, lighter, and tired, so tired?

I become more beautiful every time I open the door.

# The Cliffs at Battery Pointe



Now what happened happened a long time ago and I'm only telling you now because your mom told me she knows you played near the cliffs last weekend. I told her to keep you away. I said it's because the terrain isn't stable, that the plant life there has shallow roots and you're liable to tumble right off with nothing to grip onto if you slip near the edge.

The same things I told her when she was a girl, when I wouldn't let her play near them. I said I'd tan her hide if I found out she was playing there and good thing she believed me because I'da had the switch ready.

And you better not think I wouldn't raise a hand to you because you're my only grandson. I'd do it *because* you're my only grandson.

And all that stuff about the shifting ground and shallow-root plants is true but it's not the only reason you've got to keep away from there.

Are you listening to me? Put that damn phone down.

I didn't tell your mom this part. Keep it a secret. She already wants to put me in a home—never mind that I still do just fine, even with your grandpa

gone. But she wants to and if she heard this story she'd have me packed up and sent off before the weekend.

So I didn't tell her because she was a good girl who listened but I'm telling *you* because you're a brash, stupid boy.

There used to be an animal shelter in town—it was where Kerry's Kennels & Grooming is now—you know the place. Well I volunteered there. I was much younger then, and stronger too. I could walk the big dogs and I didn't mind the cleaning.

I quit though, after that nightmare night.

What happened back then—it's the reason I'm missing half my pinky on this hand here. Look at it—how the skin is puckered and scarred. *Look*. This is why I don't want you near the cliffs at Battery Pointe. You don't need to end up with missing parts, too.

Well that night—40 years ago, give or take—the animal shelter was a madhouse. Cats coming in, dogs going out, an officers' meeting and volunteers doing supply inventory, too. A real shit show. Too many people running this way and that. Something was bound to happen. Something bad.

See, there was a rule at the shelter: you opened a door, you shut it behind you. You opened a gate, you shut it behind you. Everywhere, every time.

But that night, opened doors got left open. Do you see where I'm going with this?

The dog's name was Diablo.

I know you think I'm making that part up, but I'm not. Diablo was a Yorkie mix, a little dustmop of a thing, got surrendered for I-don't-know-why. Well probably for something that got him his name. He was a little terror, I remember that, or was before that night.

Well like I said, that night, everyone was too hurried to be careful. Someone tried to take Diablo for a walk. Whoever it was had him leashed up, leaving the kennel area, when they bent down to adjust his collar and *bang!* Diablo nipped. The person dropped the leash, and off Diablo ran.

The door to the kennels had been left open. The door to the hallway had been left open. And not one but both front doors were propped open too, folks carrying cats in with both hands.

They probably couldn't even see their feet, not with those bulky cat carriers. Maybe didn't see him, either, fast as a squirrel and on a mission.

Anyway, Diablo ran right out into the night, dragging his leash. It was red. Your mom thinks I'm getting pokey but she's wrong. I'll always remember that leash was red.

It was the middle of winter then, too, and that only made things worse. The manager raised the alarm, called all around to ask volunteers to go looking for him. Temperatures were down in the teens; you know how it gets this time of year. Just like it is now. Freezing and bleak and bitter. And Diablo, remember, he was so little. The size of a rabbit, really. And besides freezing, he could be hit by a car or taken by a stranger or snapped up by a fox or a coyote or even a hawk.

We used to have more wild animals, back then.

So I showed up to help, in a winter coat but no mittens—I'd left the house in a rush, thinking only of that poor tiny dog in the elements. But I did wear boots and that's what probably saved my toes that night.

We split up—the volunteers. We went in different directions to cover more ground. We spread out. They asked me to head out to Battery Pointe.

So that's just what I did. And I'll always be partly glad and partly regretful that they gave the cliffs to me that night.

Lord, how the wind howled. Blew right though my coat and my sweater and my shirt. But I kept going—trudged past Otter Street, past where the billboards stood and past where the deer trails cut in. Your grandpa was at work—he didn't even know I was out in that weather. Didn't find out until he came home later and saw the note I'd left him.

Not long after I got out there, the storm really hit. Snow fell in flat, wide flakes. And it was wet—a wet snow, a heavy snow. I remember how it weighted everything down—me and the trees and anything else unlucky enough to be out that night.

Well my face went numb inside fifteen minutes. My hair was longer then, so dark it was almost black, and it whipped around my head like tentacles. I remember wishing I'd tied it back. And with wet hair in my eyes and freezing wind in my face, I called for that little dog, walking the deer paths, soon losing sight of any buildings or lights, winding deeper and deeper into the woods, knowing the cliffs were somewhere close. I knew because the waves crashed so loud against the rocks I couldn't hear my own voice; it was snatched away from me as soon as I opened my mouth.

There was all that working against me and then bare branches and twigs caught at me, too, making my progress slower. I tried to keep my hands in my pockets, but I was no skinny deer; I had to push the brush aside to move through it, and I fell more than once, tripping on roots I couldn't see, putting my hands out to break my fall. Soon, my palms were cut and scraped, but I only knew because I saw my own bloody handprints in the snow. I couldn't feel anything; nothing hurt.

I kept going but I don't know how far. I still don't know how far. Those woods are bigger than they look. And when you're inside of them they just get bigger.

Then an hour in, maybe two, I was lost and I knew it. But I had no way of calling for help. The other volunteers were far away, searching other areas, other neighborhoods.

Still, and like a fool, I didn't worry for myself. No. The closer I got to the cliff edge, the more I fretted for that dog.

My worst fear was that he'd gone over the side; he wouldn't have known where the ground fell away. I didn't either; when I came out from the brush I found myself less than a foot from the edge with the earth shifting and breaking under my feet.

I threw myself backward. I grabbed at dry brown stalks that snapped off in my hands, kicked out, scrambled. Stones clattered over the edge and I thought about how just as easily, it could have been me.

Or Diablo. And if he did fall, and the rocks didn't kill him, his battered little body would have been drowned by the icy waters of Lake Erie.

And picturing him like that, an ending I tried to stop and couldn't, made my insides feel hollow.

Well I lay there for a long time like that, letting the worry wash over me. When I sat up, I saw that I'd torn my coat and my pants were smeared with cold mud. I put a hand to my face and found my cheek was bleeding too.

I was a sad, sorry mess and I had no dog to show for my troubles.

I stood, careful of the cliff edge, and that's when I saw Diablo's tiny footprints leading under a bush, not yet filled in by the snow that kept on coming.

I followed the prints of course, leaving even the deer paths behind as I pushed through briars and branches and long, whip-like reeds. I moved parallel to the cliff; it was just six or eight feet to my left, and the waves crashed and crashed, one rolling over the other, and it was like the way my

heart beat in my chest: hope washing over worry washing over fear washing over more worry.

Finally, I broke through heavy brush and came upon a little clearing, maybe ten feet across, with saplings and branches bending toward its center like a domed ceiling. The noise of the cliffs quieted, like everything outside of that secret little circle didn't exist anymore.

And then I saw him.

Them.

At first I thought he was caught up in a prickler bush. That was another one of my worries—with him dragging his leash, he could get stuck somewhere, trapped. And I said “Diablo!” and I took a step forward, and then I saw the branches tighten around him, lift him off the ground.

I stopped.

Something was holding onto him. I didn't understand what I was looking at, and then I saw its eyes. Yellow-green like dying grass and somehow, I knew, *mean*. Angry. At me.

I learned then it had a mouth because it snarled.

I was torn—I wanted to run; I was terrified, but I couldn't leave Diablo, and even if I wanted to I don't think I could have moved. I just stood and stared, wondering how any of it could be real.

That thing—whatever it was—had limbs like twisted sticks, the color of graying bone, furred in places with some kind of hanging moss or lichen. Its body was pitted and dark, cragged like a rotting log I could only half see. I'd have never told it apart from the trees and brush around it if it hadn't been holding Diablo. If it hadn't looked at me with those bright horrible eyes.

I held my breath—I might have held it forever, or at least until I passed out, but then, Diablo whined. He was in pain; the thing was squeezing him.

That broke the spell.

“*Please*,” I said. It was a whisper. In that quiet clearing, though, the thing heard it. I said it again, louder, pushing the word through numb lips. But who knew if it spoke English? If it spoke at all?

Its eyes narrowed into slits and there was a low rumble, like a growl. Diablo whined again; it ended in a high-pitched shriek. I took a step forward—the thing was hurting that poor dog, and I had to get him.

“He’s not yours,” I said. My voice was shaking, it didn’t sound like mine, but I was trying to make whatever it was understand. “You’re hurting him. Please.”

I didn’t know why it wanted Diablo to begin with—did it eat small animals? Hurt them for fun? But the reason didn’t matter—if I couldn’t get him back, he’d be dead soon enough.

My mind raced. I felt so alone, so helpless.

Then it moved. It backed away, glaring, testing me. It moved again, toward a gap in the brush behind it. I was going to lose track of it, of Diablo too.

So I lunged. There was nothing else to do; I had no weapon, so I had to fight it with my bare hands. That red leash was like a flag in the weak moonlight; I reached for it with one hand while punching out with the other. I thought if I could knock the thing back and get Diablo’s leash, I could grab him and make a break for it. Try to outrun the thing.

But it didn’t work out like I hoped. Most things in life don’t; you’ll learn that. The creature jerked Diablo back and away; my fist landed close to its mouth and it bit down.



I heard a yelp, mine or the dog's, and felt bright, hot pain, even through the numbness. Those eyes, green like—like the sky before a tornado hits. Not human or animal, something else, and too close to mine. Burning, angry.

I kicked it, then—once or more, it's hard to remember. It still had my hand in its teeth; it wouldn't let go. Nothing in my life had ever hurt so much. With my good hand I held Diablo's leash and yanked, but the creature only bit down harder. I screamed; I think that set Diablo off, because he bit down on the thing holding him and it screamed too, or I think it did—the sound was like wind tearing through a canyon.

It released us both, but something sharp raked at my face—its claws I guess or I don't know what. I barely felt it, because all the pain my body could feel was in my hand, and I saw the stump of my finger and things got hazy from there. I must have pulled Diablo close to my chest; we were both shaking, that I remember, that I can almost still *feel*, and I put him and my bloody hand inside my jacket because I didn't know what else to do. I think we were both in shock.

They found us in the morning, still in that clearing, propped up against the base of a little tree.

It was your grandpa who got to us first. He told me later that, when hours had passed and I didn't come back to the shelter with the rest of the volunteers, the search changed. They called him, and then everyone went out looking for me.

Before they found me, Grandpa and the others had the same worries about the cliffs, about the rocks and water below. They saw a few prints in the snow; they saw the blood. They panicked, and they feared the worst, and when Grandpa found me he sobbed.

But I don't remember that. I don't remember anything until I was in a hospital bed, my hand all wrapped up, bandages taped tight across the ugliest of the cuts and scrapes I'd gotten the night before.

I'd been hypothermic, Grandpa said. Bleeding and unresponsive. Half my pinky gone, the stump ragged. Diablo was still in my arms, though, safe and warm enough. I had saved him, just like I meant to.

Of course, they asked me what attacked us. What had bitten me. But what could I say? Not the truth. So I said it was too dark; I didn't see it.

Grandpa guessed coyote and I let him believe it.

I kept Diablo. I insisted on it. Had that dog eight more years, and he never left my side. He had nightmares though—I could tell. His little legs kicking, growling in his sleep. I'd pet him and tell him he was safe, but I had my own nightmares, too.

Afterward, even years later, I'd wonder: *was it even real?* Did I imagine that thing, all sticks and sharpness, strange eyes and black-hole mouth? Was it just a delusion, prompted by shock and hypothermia?

Maybe, but I don't think so. The parts I do remember—they're not fuzzy at the edges, the way dreams are. They're crisp and they're clear and then, for a patch, they're gone, and then I was in the hospital. How well I can still see all of it—that's how I know I didn't make it up.

That and the other missing pets—mostly cats, but small dogs too, all in that neighborhood.

Coyotes, they said.

But I knew better and so did Diablo and now, so do you.

So that's it. That's my story.

Your mom will be home any minute. Do you understand now? Why I don't want you near the cliffs at Battery Pointe? Not in the woods, not on

the deer paths. Because that thing might be there still. And it might not be the only one.

Promise me you'll stay away. Swear it.

Promise me.

# Mistress Meg O'Malley



They'll seek out Meg stormtossed:

seadredged &

weary

right sick of the waves that rock them to sleep.

They'll crawl in the tavern:

ravaged &

wrecked by

too many nights fearing frights in the deep.

They'll climb to her bedroom:

fevered &

leering

jingling the silver they've saved up for flesh.

They'll weigh down her mattress:

sweating &

ripping her bodice and grabbing her breasts.

They'll come like they're drowning:

gasping &

crying

calling for mothers and mercy and God

and won't return bragging:

winking &amp;

laughing

hardy back-clapping while crewmates applaud.

They'll leave this world begging:

moaning &

helpless

necks bitten open as Meg has her fill.

(No one will hear over

howling

## Nor'easters

the screaming of men growing ever more shrill.)

They'll be dumped by morning:

lifeless &

empty—

seeking their fortunes, they found death instead,

and our Meg O'Malley:

sated &

salted

will dream while she sleeps of oceans turned red.

# About the Author



Rebecca Cuthbert is a dark fiction and poetry writer living in Western New York. She loves ghost stories, folklore, witchy women, and anything

that involves nature getting revenge. For publications and information, visit [rebeccacuthbert.com](http://rebeccacuthbert.com).



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